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En34h Housekeepers' Chat

Monday, December 2, 1929.

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Subject: "Care of House Plants in Winter." Information from W. R. Beattie,
Bureau of Plant Industry, U. S. D. A

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Saturday morning I called on my Next-Door Neighbor. She was mopping the kitchen floor.

"Come in, Aunt Sammy," she said. "Watch your step. Don't slide on my kitchen floor. The poet was right when he said 'It takes a heap of scrubbin', to make a house a home.' "

"Did he say that?" I asked.

"Something like that. Look at my beautiful fern, Aunt Sammy. Look at what used to be my beautiful fern. The pride and joy of my life. What do you suppose happened to it? I gave it lots of water. You know yourself there was always water in the saucer under the fern pot. The plant didn't die from lack of water."

"Do you suppose," I asked, "that you gave it too much water? Let's ask the garden adviser. He is an authority on house plants."

That same afternoon I stopped in to see W. R. B., the garden adviser. I asked him what caused the death of my Neighbor's beautiful fern.

"Judging by what you say," began W.R.B., "the fern was drowned. Too much water. I have had a number of letters lately from women who cannot understand why they can't raise plants in the house.

"Plants are somewhat like people. They are sensitive to their surroundings, and soon get lonesome, if left to themselves. They need human company, to minister to their wants. Shut a child in a stuffy room, feed it at irregular intervals, and what happens? House plants may not be as sensitive as babies, but after all, they are only plant children, and must have the right surroundings if they are to grow and to be healthy.

"First of all, as I have said before, house plants need sunshine, pure air, and the proper temperature. Have you ever noticed how sensitive we are to even slight changes in temperature? How a rise or a drop of 5 to 10 degrees in the sitting room -- no, they call them living rooms nowadays -- affects our comfort? I might say that plants are even more sensitive than we are, to changes in temperature. Most house plants require a night temperature of about 55 to 60 degrees, and a day temperature of 65 to 70 degrees; only a few want a higher temperature; many want a lower temperature.

"In houses where gas is used, plants suffer from the small quantities of the gas that escapes from the fixtures, and from the fumes of the burned gas. A hot air furnace that leaks the burned gases is also very bad for house plants. The air of the average home is too dry for most plants, but a pan of water on the radiator will help to keep the atmosphere in good condition.

"Going back to the matter of sunlight," continued the Garden Adviser, "at this time of the year 'the jolly round red sun' is off on a southern trip, and we don't see him until quite late in the morning, and not at all, if it is cloudy. The sunlight that comes in through our south windows in the early winter does not average more than 4 or 5 hours a day. No wonder the plants get pale and thin, like children who do not play out of doors. Window glass cuts out considerable light. That is why they do best in the open, where they get direct sunlight.

"Most house plants, with the exception of palms, should be given all the sunlight possible, during the winter months. Have you ever noticed how eagerly the plants turn toward the light? They will grow one-sided, if you don't turn them around every few days. Even turning the plants doesn't always make them grow in a uniform shapely way, but it helps.

"Another thing --- protect your house plants from freezing, or even from severe chilling, on cold nights. People catch cold very readily from sitting in a draft; here again, plants are not so different from people, they catch cold from the strong drafts that frequently blow in around the windows, especially at night, when the fires burn low. Drawing down the window shades will give considerable protection; it is also a good idea to place newspapers between the plants and the windows. If the plants are on a portable stand, the stand may be moved a foot or two away from the window during cold nights.

"Some people in the colder sections of the country have storm sash or double windows for winter. These give considerable protection from cold, but at the same time cut down the amount of light that can come in through the windows. Felt or rubber window strips are a great help where the double sash or storm windows are not used.

"Ferns are considered one of the most desirable of all house plants. Begonias, too, those which bloom practically the whole winter, make wonderful house plants. I was passing by the home of a neighbor the other day, when I was attracted by the red blooms of a begonia in the dining room window. The plant stood a foot or more high. It was simply a mass of beautiful blooms, mingled with rich green foliage. Flowers, particularly those of bright color, certainly do bring cheer to the living room on bleak winter days. They not only brighten up the room itself, but they give the home an attractive appearance from the outside."

"If house plants are to be at their best, they must be clean, not covered with dust. Give them a bath, frequently. On days when the temperature is well above the freezing point, say 45 or 50 degrees or higher, most plants may be taken out of doors and sprayed with water to remove the dust from their leaves. It won't do any harm to wash the foliage with water containing a little mild soap. Rinse the foliage, to remove all the soap. This also helps to keep the plants free from insects.

"If you use soapsuds, don't let it run down into the soil in which the plants are growing. It might produce an alkaline condition which isn't good for plants. When you wash the plants with soapy water, turn them on their sides, so the water will not run into the soil. Dry the plants as soon as possible after washing them; mildew will form on the leaves if they are left wet for a long time.

"Another good way to wash plants is to set them outdoors in a warm but gentle rain. Don't leave them too long, however, or the soil may become too wet.

"Tell your neighbor, Aunt Sammy," concluded the garden adviser, "Tell your neighbor to be more careful of her next fern. Take her this little circular on The Care of House Plants, and tell her to read it carefully. Then, if she has any questions, she may telephone or write to me."

I thanked the garden adviser, on behalf of my neighbor. This evening I shall take her the Care of House Plants information, and a recipe for fruit cake. She is going to use our recipe for fruit cake -- the very same one that I am broadcasting tomorrow. Please be prepared, to write a very nice recipe for fruit cake.

Tomorrow: "The Christmas Fruit Cake."

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